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# THE STRANGE NEW WORLD OF CONFIDENCE: BARTH'S DIALECTICAL EXHORTATION TO FEARFUL PREACHERS

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## INTRODUCTION: UK PREACHING—HUMILITY OR COWARDICE?

*Where have all your preachers gone?* This was the question, not too long ago, that one prominent Evangelical voice from across the pond hurled towards the purportedly stale pulpits of Great Britain. The critique centred upon the distinct lack of 'courage' in the heralding of the Gospel both within and beyond the walls of the church.<sup>1</sup> Effectively, this amounted to the fact that there are few *well-known* preachers in wider British culture anymore, and of those voices that do have a significant platform, not too many of them are getting into trouble for it as perhaps they *ought*. The media attention given to street preacher arrests in Scotland in the past year, for example, stood out more because such events are so *un-representative* of British preaching in general.<sup>2</sup> As expected, Mark Driscoll's controversial criticism caused a relative tidal wave of defensive blogging across all spheres of the UK Church. Whether such a sweeping assessment of British preaching is *entirely* valid or not, what might have led to such an observation? We certainly do not need to look too far into British church history to see the significant difference between what used to happen as a result of sermons and what tends to happen today, especially when we consider the wider social and ecclesial impact of the likes

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<sup>1</sup> 'Please ask why there is a lack of courageous young Christian preachers heralding the word of God across Britain... Please pray for the next Spurgeon, and if you are a Christian leader, do all you can to, by the grace of God, provide opportunities to see those kind of preachers and leaders raised up to lead the cause of the gospel in your country!' Mark Driscoll, 'A Blog Post for the Brits' (12 January 2012), available: <<http://pastormark.tv/2012/01/12/a-blog-for-the-brits>> [retrieved: 02/04/14].

<sup>2</sup> 'Another street preacher arrest' (11 January 2014), available: <<http://libertarianalliance.wordpress.com/2014/01/11/another-street-preacher-arrest/>> [retrieved: 02/04/14].

of Knox, Wesley, Whitefield, Spurgeon, Booth, or Lloyd-Jones.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, such legacies, though inimitable in their particularity, are bound together by the *kind* of confidence that emanated from their pulpits (or, indeed, their town squares and fields). Such preachers not only ‘spoke’ words in their sermons, but they ‘proclaimed’ these words as though—at *that* very moment—those words were the *only* words in the universe that seemed to matter.<sup>4</sup> ‘How *dare* they!’ we might say today.

Perhaps the charge from the nagging American critic could be waved away as mere generalization, dismissed for its lack of attentiveness to the wider issues of secularisation or a fatal forgetting of the infinite qualitative distinction between US and UK? One wonders, however, if it might be more constructive to at least *pretend* there is actually something in it. The almost vitriolic reactions to the critique across the blogosphere and beyond—even where they seemed valid—belied something of an inappropriate defensiveness at the heart of what is surely a very real problem. To avoid further knee-jerks in attempting to address the issue, it might be helpful to imagine we’re talking about a land far, far away (in no way resembling *your* pulpit, or those of any of your friends). In this way, we might trick ourselves into some genuine self-examination, which, in face of such radical criticism, is always in danger of being outgunned by an obstinate fortress of self-defence.

Clearly, of course, there are many reasons to be cautious in the pulpit, and many reasons a preacher might *not* want to imitate the guise of a

<sup>3</sup> Of eighteenth-century Edinburgh, for example, Cosh writes: ‘It is hard today to appreciate the enthusiasm with which society in general flocked to listen eagerly to sermons that might easily last two hours, often twice in a day, and the adulation, almost hero worship, lavished on the preachers of the time. Congregations hung on their every word, and good preachers were discussed with as much earnestness as fine actors, their doctrines dissected, their delivery critically analysed and their every foible and idiosyncrasy—facial detail, hair, expression, changing emotions—implacably noted.’ Mary Cosh, *Edinburgh: The Golden Age* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2002), p. 30. Many thanks to David Reimer for pointing me to this book.

<sup>4</sup> It is fair to say that as a direct result of their preaching, *things happened*. It is possible, of course, to escape down the rabbit hole from the purported charge by pointing to the ‘unseen’ fruit of much ordinary preaching; i.e. that which steadies and sustains over the long haul in contrast to the firework-like impact of an itinerant evangelist (‘here today, gone tomorrow’). Of course, there need be no call for preaching to conform to previous effervescent modes purely because they *seemed* to be more immediately transformative or ‘exciting’. Despite this caveat, the question remains: is there something of the inherent ‘confidence’ of such preachers which is overlooked in the contemporary pulpit?

Reformer or a Great Awakener. We stand on the shoulders not only of great faithful preachers, but also of pulpiteers and false prophets—those who would use the notion of what *ought* to be said to convey what they *want* to be said. Also emanating from this unfortunate legacy is the inescapable ‘postmodern’ suspicion of authority, in which preachers—as well as their hearers—are hopelessly entangled. Best, then, not to say something *too* radical or convincing, lest preachers draw attention to themselves, speak ‘above their station’, or worse, get it wrong. After all, we might ask, was not Adolf Hitler one of the most powerful preachers in the history of mankind, whose ‘confident’ rhetoric was rotten to the core? The fear of speaking ‘out-of-turn’ (an undeniably *British* trait) is surely bound up with the fear of sounding in any way like a tyrant.

It is at this juncture that we introduce Karl Barth into our fable. We enlist Barth’s help in addressing this problem not because he has any especial *legacy* in the formation of the homiletical *Zeitgeist*,<sup>5</sup> but more because of his relentlessly *dialectical* approach to the question of preaching. In this article we will bring his dialectic of preacherly authority into the atmosphere of the problem of preacherly confidence. We may indeed find that the idol of perpetual uncertainty which dominates many pulpits today may be brought face to face with the *true* implications of the dialectical condition: a preacher standing not only before their demanding congregation, but before their demanding God who commissions and empowers them for this task.

## 1. ‘NO’: FALLIBILITY AND IMPOSSIBILITY

Karl Barth is a theologian who has the highest conceivable view of preaching whilst maintaining the lowest conceivable view of the preacher. He is also a theologian who witnessed first-hand the misuses of preaching, particularly in the hypnotically enthusiastic rhetoric of ‘nationalism’. Such preaching *twice* deceived large swathes of the German people, many of whom were Barth’s own teachers, colleagues and friends. The conflation

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, quite the opposite is the case. Most contemporary homiletics have sought to move away altogether from Barth’s heraldic emphasis upon preaching, which many saw as a ‘stranglehold’. See David M. Greenshaw, ‘The Formation of Consciousness’, in Thomas G. Long and Edward Farley (eds.), *Preaching as a Theological Task: Word, Gospel, Scripture: In Honor of David Buttrick* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), pp. 1-17 [11]. Barth is often criticised for harbouring a ‘potentially delusional’ neglect of the human side of preaching, whereby the preacher is assumed to be transparent to their message. See William H. Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), p. 191.

of *God* and *Volk* seeped into their pulpits and thundered into their pews with utterly disastrous consequences.<sup>6</sup> It was, in many ways, Barth's quest as a dialectical theologian to restore theologically faithful preaching to the Church. This quest involved, firstly, pressing 'mute' to the preacher's voice, before proceeding to amplify it: 'The word of God is not for sale; and therefore it has no need of shrewd salesmen.'<sup>7</sup> Yet, far from yielding to apophatic uncertainty in the face of pulpit abuse, Barth emerged from the fog (as he often did) clutching a paradox: Barth declared (more fiercely than ever) that the church—precisely *because* of her appropriate mutedness in and of herself—has been given words not only to *speak*, but to shout from the rooftops.

Barth's theology of preaching has a complex history. Variations of homiletical trajectory may be found ranging from his Safenwil years, the *Römerbrief* period, through to his *Homiletics* seminars, and even between the earlier and latter sections of the *Church Dogmatics*. During his full-time pastorate, and particularly in the years following the advent of the First World War, Barth reflected much upon the *impossibility* of the task of preaching. He saw preaching as such a high calling that no finite human being should ever wish to attempt it: 'Moses and Isaiah, Jeremiah and Jonah knew of a certainty why they did *not* want to enter into the preacher's situation... There can be no such thing as a minister. Who dares, who can, preach knowing what preaching is?'<sup>8</sup> The close examination of this impossible task centred upon the finitude and sinfulness of humanity, which cannot possibly withstand—let alone 'herald'—this wholly *other* Word of God.<sup>9</sup> How, then, he reflected, can any preacher be truly *confident*?<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For a fascinating insight into the religious and political context underlying Barth's homiletical emphases, see Angela Dienhart Hancock, *Karl Barth's Emergency Homiletic, 1932-1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, 'The Freedom of the word of God', in Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Come Holy Spirit*, trans. George W. Richards, Elmer G. Homrighausen, and Karl J. Ernst (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1934), pp. 216-29 [219].

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> No doubt it was also a polemical *response* to the anthropocentric, immanentist preaching prevalent during this period, in which 'God' and 'nation' became one and the same ideal.

<sup>10</sup> Barth never ceased to come down hard upon any theological student with pretensions of prophetic grandeur, self-stylizing themselves upon the radical voices of church history. See one letter in which he gives a student a suitable dressing-down because he let slip his true 'reformational' intentions

At this early point, Barth wanted to articulate as strongly as possible the 'crisis' situation, that preachers must do what they *know* to be impossible (and that if they *don't* know it, they *ought* to know it before daring to climb into a pulpit!):<sup>11</sup> 'The Word of God on the lips of man is an impossibility; it does not happen: no one will ever accomplish it or see it accomplished.'<sup>12</sup> Preachers are locked in the tension of this absurdity, and are made restless by it, even as they must actually *continue* this impossible task week after week. It is no wonder that cowardice may creep in when the relentlessness of this task seems to shackle it at its very foundations. Indeed, 'who *can* preach, knowing what preaching is?'

## 2. 'YES': COMMISSION AND PROMISE

Thankfully, Barth does not terminate his homiletical trajectory with outright pessimism but comes to articulate a more *overtly* positive theology of preaching. Here, he *emphasizes* the divine 'Yes' to preaching over the divine 'No', without dispensing with the No altogether: 'our possibility of knowing God's Word is the possibility of a clear and certain knowledge, not equal but at least similar to the clarity and certainty with which God

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of a grant-funded visit to Edinburgh, saying: 'What shall I really do in the land of John Knox?' In reply, Barth rubbishes these 'high-flying plans for the reformation of dogmatics,' cautioning: 'Before one can say (or meaningfully ask) anything, one must first listen'. Barth, 'To a Theological Student, Basel, 22 August 1961', in *Letters 1961-1968* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), p. 19. However, this does not mean Barth is *a priori* opposed to such radical voicing or action; this is evident in his musings over the controversial subject regarding God's raising-up of a prophetic voice in a time of crisis: 'Calvin, Theodore Beza and John Knox, while they did not allow tyrannicide as a general possibility or raise it to the level of a legal institution as popularly supposed, also pointed to extreme public emergencies in which it might happen that God would raise up an avenger and deliverer whose destructive work would not be murder but would be done in obedience to His command.' Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter *CD*], 4 vols. in 13 pts., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956-75), III/4, p. 449.

<sup>11</sup> It is, of course, possible to see here Barth's emphasis on grace in an embryonic form (at least, it is embryonic in comparison to that of the *CD*). Here, the 'promise' element of preaching is affirmed in that God does indeed promise to speak through preaching in spite of a preacher's fallibility. But Barth is certainly more concerned at this point to emphasise the dialectical elements and the tension involved in the act of preaching rather than to *emphasise* grace in the way he did later on.

<sup>12</sup> Barth, *Word of God and Word of Man*, p. 125.

knows Himself in His Word.<sup>13</sup> We might pause to reflect upon just how ‘high’ a view of functional epistemology this actually is. Such a conception of analogous theological knowledge is the foundation underlying the ‘possibility’ of preaching. However, such effective knowledge does not come at the expense of the simultaneous ‘impossibility’ of preaching. Barth retains as high a view of preaching as he had in his earlier years; the difference here is the nuance which we might call the *paradoxical possibility* of preaching. We *cannot* speak for God, and nevertheless we *can*—and *must*—speak for God. This paradox is articulated by Barth as being resolved either *by* or *in* God Himself, despite the fact that we have no access to *how* this is possible: ‘We can see the stick dipped in water only as a broken stick. But though we cannot see it, it is invisibly and yet in truth a completely unbroken stick.’<sup>14</sup> Essentially, the paradox here is only apparent rather than ontological: the stick does not remain broken *beyond* the water-line as well as *above* it, hence it does not correspond—in *reality*—to how it ‘seems’. What is perceived as a ‘broken stick’ is ‘*in truth* a completely unbroken stick’, meaning that our knowing God’s Word—upon which our preacherly courage (or cowardice) depends—is *actual* knowledge.

Barth’s shift to *highlighting* the ‘possibility’ for preaching demonstrates that preaching cannot be forever caught reflecting upon its own ‘illegitimacy’ lest it be unfaithful to the reality of God’s effectual authorisation and commission.<sup>15</sup> Attention to the dialectical condition and the need to emphasize ‘humility’ in preaching is still important for Barth (crucial, even), but not to the extent that it could subsequently undermine the paradoxical ‘confidence’ that preaching simultaneously requires. In a key paragraph of *CD I/2* he says that the impossibility of preaching ‘does not permit [preachers] to be faint-hearted, as though in their humanity they were not able to speak the Word of God, but only their own human words.’<sup>16</sup> The genuine possibility of the Word of God in preaching remains at the forefront. Far from paralysing preachers with unsolveable dialecti-

<sup>13</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, p. 240.

<sup>14</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, p. 240.

<sup>15</sup> Whenever this happens, God’s commissioning of the preacher and God’s own willingness to speak through the preacher is undermined by human preoccupation with limitation, which may even become a newly-birthing anthropocentrism. The very existence of the dialectical condition that makes preaching ‘impossible’ is a product of our finite humanity, since we cannot articulate dogmatic statements with absolute certainty. A preoccupation with our finitude, then, can become a turning away from the *in*finitude of God, who in his grace calls the finite to proclaim the infinite.

<sup>16</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, pp. 746–47.

cal riddles, Barth not only exhorts preachers to be bold but he does not allow them *not* to be!

Even though Barth continues to operate within theological dialectics here, this is a marked change from his earlier *restlessness* between the dialectical polarities.<sup>17</sup> He is here acknowledging the dialectical condition, yet doing so alongside an emphatic *affirmation* of the Church's paradoxical call to preach:

It is true that to think we can do this is always a venture for which without God's own action we necessarily lack the authority, insight and courage. It is true that God alone can speak about God. Only it is not to be forgotten that all these considerations can only be qualifications and elucidations of the positive affirmation that God gives the Church the task of speaking about Him, and that in so far as the Church fulfils this task God Himself is in its midst to proclaim His revelations and testimonies.<sup>18</sup>

The *reality* of God's commissioning of preaching is of greater weighting within the aforementioned dialectic of possibility and impossibility. It is the *paradoxical possibility* of preaching that transforms this dialectic into something more taxonomical than a perpetually uncertain tension. There is an order to this dialectic; the endgame is not the wrestling itself but the reality of *actual* proclamation. This means that, although the dialectical *impossibility* remains (and *must* remain) the emphasis must be

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<sup>17</sup> Even in his earlier essays, of course, we see a self-criticism of 'dialectic' in and of itself; Barth does not think dialectic is 'privileged' as a method in any way, but merely that it publicises the reality of the contradiction without solving the problem of preaching itself, that this activity *does* (and *must*) continue. See 'The Word of God and the Task of Ministry', in *Word of God and Word of Man*, pp. 206-12. In many ways, Barth's 'development' of thought over dialectic and preaching can be seen as more spiralling than linear; he tends to circulate and return to this issue a number of times, even doing so *within* the first volume of *CD*, as this thought becomes more ordered, even though it never settles into a static mode. For more on Barth's dialectical development, see Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1910-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). See also Berkouwer's reading of Barth's dialectical method: 'Barth was certainly not concerned to play a game of paradoxical dialectics, nor to compensate for the No by the speaking of a reassuring and moderating Yes. He was concerned to expose the exclusiveness of the salvation that is in *God's* hand alone, and which can only in *that* exclusiveness be salvation for us.' G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: The Paternoster Press, 1956), p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> Barth, *CD* I/2, p. 757.



placed upon the confessional situation that God has indeed 'promised' this task to the Church. This means we must presuppose the impossibility of preaching in our fallibility, but we must also 'pre-presuppose' that the Church *has* (not maybe, but *definitely*) been called to preach. This dialectically positive affirmation becomes, for Barth, the new starting point for understanding preaching:

we must begin with the affirmation that, by the grace of revelation and its witness, God commits Himself with His eternal Word to the preaching of the Christian Church in such a way that this preaching is not merely a proclamation of human ideas and convictions, but...it is God's own proclamation.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, Barth is now able to begin not from apophatic paralysis, but from the *reality* of divine promise: 'the Church rests, not on the presupposition, but very definitely on the recollection and the expectation that God in fact has spoken and will speak the Word to us in the Bible.'<sup>20</sup> This expectation must shape the way the preacher approaches the ever-complex task of attaining preacherly confidence.

### 3. 'NO ...YES': PARADOX AND FAITH

But how does this help us British 'cowards' to actually *do* this? How do we walk the dialectical tightrope of the imposter/prophet with our perpetual awareness of how ridiculous, pretentious or tyrannical we *may* sound when the purported 'Word of God' protrudes from our pulpits? Barth's answer is that the preacher must orient themselves towards faith, believing that God truly has spoken and truly does speak through preaching. Faith is crucial to apprehending this paradox, as in Hebrews 11:1: 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' The paradox of *how* a preacher may speak of God even as they *cannot* speak of God is conceptually inaccessible *except* by faith. For Barth, this faith takes

<sup>19</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, pp. 746-7.

<sup>20</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, pp. 254-5. For Barth, the Bible is entrusted to the Church *for* proclamation, even though the Word may never become its static *possession*: 'If a man, the Church, Church proclamation and dogmatics think they can handle the Word and faith like capital at their disposal, they simply prove thereby that they have neither the Word nor faith. When we have them, we do not regard them as a possession but strain after them, hungering and thirsting, and for that reason blessed.' Barth, *CD I/1*, p. 225. This is, in fact, a 'point of contact' Barth shared with Emil Brunner: 'This truth cannot be *held*, or possessed. Its nature is, rather, such that it takes possession of us, "lays hold of us."' Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, trans. David Cairns (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 28.

place in the ongoing activity of preaching itself; preaching *as if* we really *can* preach the Word of God: 'The proof of faith consists in the proclamation of faith. The proof of the knowability of the Word consists in confessing it. In faith and confession the Word of God becomes a human thought and a human word.'<sup>21</sup> Thus, the possibility of preaching is grounded in the concrete act of *real* preaching, risked in faith that God will fulfil his promise to speak. Any presupposition that preaching is *solely* impossible (removed from the paradoxical condition) is actually faithless.

'Faith', of course, could easily imply 'fideism', as though this were simply a subjective confidence in *any* intimation that comes to our minds (even within the bounds of Scriptural exposition). For preaching, this could lead (and *has* led) to all kinds of homiletical disasters. Faith, although essential, does not discount the importance of theological reflection upon the dialectical condition. Barth was keen to hold to both, even as he stressed the faith polarity more emphatically because it is grounded in the *reality* of the preaching task. Where a preacher is torn in the dialectical storm over what or how to preach, Barth grounds the words of the preacher in their authoritative divine source:

It does not cling to its own humanity—either in arrogance or diffidence—but to the task imposed upon it in its humanity. And as it does so, it can confess...with a final certainty, that as it speaks about God in human words, it proclaims God's own Word. But doing this, how can it fall into arrogance or indolence? It can do so only if it is uncertain in this confession. And it will be uncertain in this confession only if it allows itself to look elsewhere than to Jesus Christ.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, both prideful assertiveness *and* prideful reticence in preaching are countered by embracing the paradox of grace that undergirds church proclamation. A purely 'apophatic' stance renders preaching powerless by remaining in the dialectical condition rather than under God's grace. For, although we are indeed 'powerless' to preach, such apophatism is not reticent *enough*. Preachers are indeed *absolutely* powerless to preach; they cannot speak a single word; and it is through this paralysis that God enables them to preach by his power, precisely because they are powerless. To deny this reality in the name of supposed 'humility' could actually be more arrogant by denying God his grace-giving freedom from a supposedly superior vantage point. Barth calls such a diversion, 'scepticism in the guise of piety.'<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Barth, CD I/1, p. 241.

<sup>22</sup> Barth, CD I/2, pp. 757-8.

<sup>23</sup> Barth, CD I/2, p. 758.

For Barth, then, the dialectic of faith and humility grounds the proper theological justification for preaching. In this taxonomical dialectic, 'possibility' *supersedes* 'impossibility'. Although such preaching can never be done in a whimsical 'spirit of self-assertion',<sup>24</sup> it can nonetheless be *confident* because its assurance relies upon God's own promise in his Word: '[The preacher] is not sure of himself but of the Word of God, and he is not sure of the Word of God in and of himself but in and of the Word.'<sup>25</sup> Thus, faith is the mode through which the preacher may grasp their paradoxical God-speech. There is no confidence whatsoever in a preacher's own ability or worthiness to do so. Yet, in faith they may believe the promise that God chooses to speak through preaching by actually *doing* it.

#### 4. '...YES!': THE STRANGE NEW WORLD

And so, in the end, confidence in pulpit speech is not merely a theological possibility, it is a theological reality. As we have seen, Barth proclaims not only a chastening of *overconfidence* but an even sterner rebuke of reluctance:

There is no possible place for idleness, indifference or lukewarmness. No appeal can be made to human imperfection where the claim is directed to the very man whose incapacity and unworthiness for this ministry is known and admitted even when he is charged with it, without altering the fact that he really is charged with it. If there is no escape in arrogance, there is no escape in pusillanimity or indolence.<sup>26</sup>

Barth does not let his preachers off the hook in false humility or cowardice. Indeed, a preacher must proclaim their appointed word 'even if it costs the preacher his neck'.<sup>27</sup> This is no *undialectical* confidence.<sup>28</sup> This is a *new* confidence, an *unwelcome* confidence which continually wrestles through the dialectic and emerges with a paradoxical 'yes!' Indeed, a

<sup>24</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, p. 765.

<sup>25</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, p. 224.

<sup>26</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, p. 757.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 115.

<sup>28</sup> 'The sense of being a swinging pendulum protects the speaker against the arrogance of acting officially in virtue of a vocation, of deriving authority from any society, of trying to make prophetic announcements, of yielding to any human pride or conceit. It is the free moving of the Spirit that initiates the swinging of the pendulum, and this swinging takes place in sincerest unity with each and all and in complete equality, destroying every first and last and every earthly order.' Barth, *Homiletics*, p. 21.

true preacher of the Gospel is to be as confident (*more* confident, even) than the most arrogant pulpiteer or tyrant. This is a confidence which emanates from the perpetual awareness of dialectical humility. Preaching may be confident because of the real *act* of God's calling the Church to the task of proclamation. In this sense, it is vital that 'confidence' as a homiletical imperative takes dialectical precedence over 'uncertainty'. Preaching is confident not because preachers *can* speak for God, but precisely because they *cannot*, by which they may only rely on God's gracious commission to do so.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, this means we may not be permitted to look back to the powerful preaching of bygone eras with a mere wistful nostalgia. We may remind ourselves that preachers are called to speak as though they themselves are *bringing* the Word of God, speaking *for* God in the midst of their hearers with distinct authority.<sup>30</sup> William Willimon, one of the notable contemporary voices to interact with Barth's preaching, says: 'Preaching is not only talk about God but miraculous talk by God.'<sup>31</sup> Indeed, far from being caught in between the throws of dialectical uncertainty, 'preachers risk everything to speak because they are confident that God has spoken to them'.<sup>32</sup> However much we may wish to extol the other side of this coin (and it should never be far from our minds), the notion of appropriate preacherly confidence is bound up within what preaching actually *is*, as heraldic proclamation of the kingly message.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> 'That man really cannot really speak of God is only realised when it is known that he really can really speak of God, because God Himself with His Word and Spirit steps forth, and has already stepped forth, into the midst, in order to make possible for man that which is not possible for him of himself. It requires the God Who Himself speaks for Himself, it requires the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the power which enables us to speak rightly of God.' Barth, *CD I/2*, p. 752.

<sup>30</sup> 'Preaching does not reflect, reason, dispute or academically instruct. It proclaims, summons, invites and commands...It calls each and all to decision for faith instead of unbelief, to obedience instead of disobedience, to knowledge in the battle against ignorance.' Barth, *CD IV/3*, p. 869. This is the *sui generis* 'event' which takes place in Christian preaching.

<sup>31</sup> William H. Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), p. 56.

<sup>32</sup> Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology*, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Confidence, for both preacher and hearer, is located in the knowledge that the preacher is not alone in the moment of preaching, as Paul speaks of his preaching to the Thessalonians: 'when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers' (1 Thess. 2:13). It is not only that God is revelatory in preaching, then, but that he is revelatory

It seems fitting, on this notion of heraldic witness, to conclude by quoting Barth speaking to his homiletical students in Bonn in the aftermath of Hitler's appointment as chancellor and the oncoming commencement of the Third Reich. It is a typically *preachy* comment in which Barth appears to take the guise of a regaling Hebrew prophet (as he occasionally liked to do). It is our task as theologians, of course (and as UK preachers, in particular), to decide whether or not we believe him, and if so, whether we will be willing to do anything about it. I leave you, then, as sinners in the hands of an angry Barth:

But *woe* to the preachers who do not see first how *relevant* the Word of the Bible is to the people of *today*! Woe even *more* to preachers who *do* see the ... relevance of the biblical Word ... but who are then *fearful* or *unwilling* to give *offense* and thus become *deserters* of the Word—the Word which seeks to *seize* and *disturb* and *confront* the people of today, and in this way to lead them *truly* to the rest of God, but which is *buried* by the *cowardice* and *disobedience* of the preachers, and thus *prevented* from doing its proper work!<sup>34</sup>

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in a particular way in preaching, *through* the preacher's words. This is an especially chosen method of God's self-revelation—a *promised* self-revelation through the preaching of his Word in the power of the Spirit.

<sup>34</sup> Barth, *Homiletics*, p. 114 ('heraldic' emphasis added!).